

Facilitating and Managing Course Communications

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Most use of the Internet for course communications is asynchronous, meaning that it is independent of time and place. Both you and your students can read and respond to messages and participate in online discussions whenever and wherever it is most convenient, essentially 24-hour access. From a logistical perspective, if you travel during an academic term, electronic mail and other asynchronous tools, such as TigerNet's Forums portlet, enable you to keep in touch with your class from hotel rooms, conference sites, airports, and other locations that provide Internet access.

The disadvantages of asynchronous course communications can be imposing. The first and foremost concern among many faculty is the potential number of messages that can be generated. Both professors and students can be overwhelmed during an academic term by 500 or more course messages generated on multiple threads, several of which may be running simultaneously. This can be a particular problem for students enrolled in two or more Internet-intensive courses (and the faculty who teach them) and may lead to what Conrad (1997) called "virtual stress" or "asynchronous anxiety." Conrad's use of these terms was tongue-in-cheek and not based on documented psychological conditions, but the potential for damage is real. Beyond information overload, Collins and Berge (1997) noted that discussions can be attenuated by time, as conversations that may take minutes in the face-to-face classroom often extend over hours and days and sometimes a week or longer via the Internet.

This paper will focus upon two common vehicles for course communications at Dakota Wesleyan University - conventional electronic mail (Outlook) and use of the Forums portlet in TigerNet.

Electronic Mail

Even if e-mail is not a required component of your course, you can count on students sending messages to you, asking questions regarding course material, assignments, deadlines, exam questions, and about every other topic you can imagine, not all of which may be related to the course. (Even if you don't provide students with your address, they will find it in the campus directory or deduce it from our method of assigning user IDs.)

The context here is e-mail as a *one-to-one* communication tool. The examples above are those in which messages might come from students to you. You are also likely to send e-mail to individual students. For example, you might ask a student to meet with you during office hours. You could send out reminders when assignments are overdue. You might provide online counseling and/or tutoring for students having trouble grasping course material. E-mail may be a convenient way for you to collect and return written assignments such as term papers and report drafts. Your comments can easily be inserted electronically, and then you can return the evaluated version also as an attachment to a message.

In a completely online course, or in a hybrid course with a significant online component, *one-to-many* communication, from you to your students, is an imperative. You as the instructor need to keep your students informed constantly. Use online communication tools to introduce new topics, remind students about deadlines, announce upcoming events

and/or schedule changes, provide guidance, and, in general, just keep in touch. Constant contact is essential in an online course. Students as a group should hear from you at least weekly and individually at least that often. Instructor silence or non-responsiveness will kill an online course faster than probably anything else short of a complete server meltdown.

For communicating individually or with your students as a group, you have at least three options at DWU. Use Outlook. (You can create a course alias in the Contacts section of Outlook for this purpose.) You can also use the Email All tool in the Coursemates portlet of your course in TigerNet, or you can use the Announcements tool in TigerNet.

TigerNet Forums

The Forums portlet in TigerNet can be used to extend or substitute for face-to-face discussions in the conventional classroom. Why even think about doing this? The reasons are many. Here are a few good ones.

- Course forums on TigerNet are available at any time, day or night. Students are not limited to 2-3 p.m. MWF (or whenever your class meets) to participate in the discussions. They can sit in their dorm rooms or living rooms at 4:00 in the morning and join in the interaction wearing nothing but their undershorts, if that..... So can you.
- Many times during classroom discussions, students don't have time to think reflectively about a question or another student's comment before the opportunity to respond has passed. In online discussions, that moment is available for as long as the topic is posted. This is very important. Having the opportunity to sit and reflect about the discussion results in a higher quality dialog and enables discussions at the higher end of the cognitive domain – analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Study after study has shown the overall quality of online discussions is generally at a higher level than discussions in the conventional classroom.
- In online discussions, students have time to review their notes, their course readings, and even independent readings before responding. Wouldn't you be impressed if a student disagreed with another student's posting and cited literature to support her position? Hard to do that in the face-to-face classroom unless the literature is memorized or stashed in the student's backpack, and even then it probably can't be reviewed in time before the discussion moves on.
- Certain students, for reasons of ethnicity or culture, gender, physical appearance, disabling condition, or personality, are reluctant to speak up in a conventional classroom. Online discussions put everyone on more equal ground, particularly if postings are anonymous, which TigerNet permits. This is another consistent research finding.
- Students can word-process and edit their messages before they hit the Post button. Even after the message has been posted, the sender has the opportunity to un-send, re-open, edit, and send it again. If the sender changes his mind, he can delete the message entirely, like it never happened. They surely don't have that option in the conventional classroom! Once it's said, it's said!!! And for that reason also, some students hesitate to speak up.

Online Discussion Strategies

Avoid posting discussion questions that just ask for simple factual information. This is a common flaw in the "discussion" questions found at the end of textbook chapters. Questions like these rarely lead to good discussions. Questions posted to the Forums should engage the students in higher-order thinking and allow them to apply what they've

learned to addressing Real World issues. Journal articles, web sites, and case studies/vignettes can be excellent discussion starters.

For example, here are some questions that I posted to the Education 701 graduate course Forum on TigerNet here last fall:

- (Subject: Overcoming barriers to technology integration) Part II of the Byrom reading identifies barriers to the integration of technology in education. Do you see these barriers in your own schools? If so, how do we address them? Can technology be successfully integrated while these barriers are in place?
- (Subject: The Digital Divide between students and their teachers) This is one of the most important forms of the Digital Divide for us to understand, especially in this class. What are the implications, both short-term and long-term, if students don't see their teachers using the Internet effectively, as the Levin and Arafeh report [published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and linked to from WebLinks] indicated was a widespread situation?
- (Subject: Parent resistance to technology) **Case study:** Lilac A. Rugg, the newly elected President of the Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) for the Lone Crocus Unified School District, has visited the high school on six different occasions. She has written a letter to the principal expressing her outrage at the hundreds of computers she saw in the media center and in many classrooms throughout the building. She believes that having all those computers in the school is a waste of taxpayers' money.....She suggests that the district should sell the computers and lay off the technology staff. She feels the district should use the money to hire "real" teachers, not only for the advanced classes but also to shore up the district's abysmal test scores in basic subjects such as math and reading. Why is this instructional technology so important, anyway? [End case study] How would you respond to Ms. Rugg? The articles by Smith and Sulla describe ways in which administrators and technology coordinators can address teacher resistance to technology, but how do you do this with parents and other community members? [Note that this question also requires them to examine their own beliefs about technology in the schools. They might agree with Lilac.]
- (Subject: What works for you re technology training?) The Brand article describes professional development in technology in an ideal world. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world. You already have many demands on your school time as well as your personal time. What is a realistic approach to technology training that actually could be implemented in your school environments? Under the circumstances, what would work for you?

Even though this was the first experience with online discussions for many of my students, and many had minimal technology skills when the course started, I would characterize our online interactions as "robust" and beyond my expectations.

Questions such as these wouldn't work in all courses, but they can be quite valuable in many, particularly those in which students are challenged to reflect upon their faith, their values, and the practical applications of knowledge in the disciplines they study. This is all about engagement. We want our students to be intellectually engaged – with their professors, with each other, and with the content of each course. The Forums portlet is an excellent place for this to happen. It is also about assessment. Student postings to the Forums provide excellent opportunities for us to assess what they know and the level of effort they are willing to put into learning.

Successful Implementation: Facilitation and Management

Following are some general principles that can help assure that online communication activities will be successful. First and foremost, online course communication must have both purpose and structure. Sweet (1997) offered the analogy of opening the door to an empty room and inviting students to enter and have an interesting conversation, without providing any reason for them to be there or direction for their discussions. Sweet concluded that students would not stay in the room long, and that a "virtual" empty room would have the same result.

Facilitating Online Discussions

If online course activities are to work, your students must cooperate. Allocate time early in the term (the first day of class in a conventional face-to-face course would be good; post expectations early in an online course) to talk about your intentions and expectations related to online course communications (Conrad, 1997), and to prepare students to participate in these activities. Some students will be apprehensive, particularly those who are unaccustomed to active learning or have had little experience with the Internet. Try to create an environment in which the students understand how they will benefit from online activities and look forward to taking part. A description of online course components and goals, detailed procedures, a visible structure for the activities, and listing of the rules and policies in the course syllabus or other handout could be a great help.

It is important to try to overcome the conditioning of your students to be passive. Give them opportunities to be interactive early in the term. For example, you might require that they post short biographies or have them participate in some ice-breaking activity online. On the surface, such an assignment helps your class members to become better acquainted with each other, but your ultimate purpose is to get them used to active learning.

Your role as discussion moderator in providing structure and direction for online activities cannot be overemphasized. These functions include introducing the topic and clearly framing the issues or identifying the questions to be addressed, encouraging students to respond and build on each other's comments, providing additional information when appropriate and linking discussion threads with the literature, synthesizing key points and building upon them, identifying contradictions or inconsistencies in student contributions, and summarizing and drawing attention to the most critical discussion points (Harasim, 1987). This process describes good discussion technique, period. It would be equally effective in a face-to-face classroom.

Managing Online Communications

What else can you do to maximize learning opportunities for students while keeping your workload under control? Here are some suggestions:

For course e-mail:

- Don't assume that your students are experienced e-mail users. You may even have to refer some to the Help Desk to get their accounts set up or assist others in learning to use electronic mail.
- Don't commit yourself to quick responses to e-mail messages. Promise students a two-day turnaround (or whatever is reasonable for you), and if you can respond more quickly, fine.
- Block fixed times of the day for e-mail so it does not consume hours that should be devoted to other responsibilities such as course preparation or grading.

For online discussions on TigerNet:

- Grading student participation in online discussions gives students serious incentive to take part. See [this example](#) for ideas on how you can express your expectations to your students and advise students of your assessment rubric. (This particular example was prepared for a doctoral-level course and is a little heavy for undergraduates. However, you may find it useful as a guide.)
- Make sure students understand that your evaluation is based on quality, not quantity. Establish your evaluation criteria to reward those whose postings demonstrate critical thinking and clear understanding of the course content and its applications in the real world. You may also wish to reward those who jump into a discussion early instead of waiting a week. Limit credit for insignificant postings, especially late in the course, when students are tempted to shotgun one- and two-liner postings to enhance the appearance of their "participation."
- Don't grade online participation on a curve. Be willing to award all students full credit for participation if all of them meet your expectations. It can happen.
- Set a limit on the number of discussion threads running simultaneously. Too many will be confusing and perhaps overwhelming. If you sense that the limit has been reached, deactivate those that are older and appear to have run their course.
- Require that only substantive messages be posted to TigerNet forums. Ask students to avoid sending messages that consist solely of "me too" or "I agree" or similar statements without meaningful comments.
- ◆ Following Harasim, use your own participation to provide structure: introduce the topic and frame issues, encourage students to build upon each other's comments, link discussion threads to course content and the literature, synthesize key points, and summarize.
- Read all of the new discussion postings before you respond to any. Try to get a feel for the entire discussion up to the moment. Often you can consolidate thoughts related to several postings in a single response.
- Expect students to read other student's postings, and encourage students to respond to each other's comments, to question, critique, or expand. Don't assume this is your responsibility alone. Without interaction, there is no "discussion."
- Assign students to serve as online discussion facilitators for topics of special interest to them.

For both:

- Post periodic FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) that address common queries.
- Set limits on message length, such as three screens.

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